

ROLAND DEISER

# Designing THE Smart Organization

HOW  
**BREAKTHROUGH**  
CORPORATE LEARNING  
INITIATIVES DRIVE  
STRATEGIC CHANGE AND  
INNOVATION

## CASE SIX

### Transforming the U.S. Army Through an Informal Leadership Learning Network

U.S. Army

Much has been written about communities of practice as spaces for peer-to-peer knowledge exchange that lead to a participatory culture of “situated” learning. Self-organized lateral discourse and information flow across functional and geographical boundaries are known for their power to promote learning and collaborative sense making and to harvest the knowledge potential of organizations. However, the concept can be hard to implement as a truly self-organized and informal learning infrastructure, especially in large and complex organizations that typically suffer from an overkill of formal structures and regulations. Often communities are launched only to dry out after initial excitement, or they exist in the shadow of mainstream formal processes without much managed impact on the organization’s performance. Successfully anchored communities of practice are quite a rare phenomenon in the world of large corporations.

The more striking is the following case. It exemplifies how the U.S. Army, often perceived as the symbol of a hierarchical, doctrine-driven institution, came to adopt a radical change in the way it learns and disseminates knowledge among its military

leaders. The story originated as a grassroots effort by a small team of company commanders who set up an informal virtual platform for their peers to share ideas and learn from each other in order to improve their leadership capabilities. As the informal network grew in popularity, the Army took note of its strategic value and has now adopted it as a key learning strategy for other key leadership positions in the organization.

What makes the case particularly interesting is that the CompanyCommand project is much more than just another example of how communities of practice work. The initiative is not only extremely well designed; it also unfolds on the very unique background of an extremely hierarchical and rigidly structured organization, and it evolves into a comprehensive learning architecture that showcases the cross-fertilizing interplay of informal grassroots processes and formal routines. Today CompanyCommand touches thousands of Army leaders across the globe who are in the strategically sensitive position of executing the Army's strategy on the field. As such, the learning project has become a major transformational force toward a military organization of the twenty-first century.

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While they were commanding companies in separate units of the U.S. Army, Nate Allen and Tony Burgess were friends and neighbors. For several years, each evening after work they would spend countless hours sitting on their front porches, talking about what was working for them in their jobs and what wasn't, sharing lessons learned, and brainstorming different approaches to the challenges they encountered in their profession as company commanders. They would tell each other how they were developing key relationships among their troops and how they were nurturing the junior leaders they were responsible for. They would discuss books they were reading and ponder ideas for implementing new practices in their commands.

Company commanders like Nate and Tony play a key role in the Army. They are the last line of direct command, the interface between the strategic intent of the organization and its operational execution. Company commanders put strategy into practice; they

enact policy and carry out the tactical implementation of strategies. As such, they carry an incredible amount of responsibility, and their performance can make or break any military campaign they are involved in. Company commanders are typically responsible for approximately 120 soldiers, and they usually have five to eight years prior experience. Within the U.S. Army's force of 500,000 soldiers, there are a total of approximately 3,600 company commanders.

In the complex and rapidly changing environment of the modern battlefield, company commanders are continuously tasked with learning on the fly and "figuring it out" on the ground. There is a lot at stake in how these young leaders enact their responsibilities; the ultimate success of any operation depends very much on their judgment. Generals might craft a brilliant strategy, but if company commanders and their teams do not execute it effectively, the strategy will fail.

On the other hand, strategies for operating in unpredictable environments are seldom perfect, often incomplete, and sometimes even flawed. If company commanders can figure out something better on the ground and act in accordance with the demands of situation, the results can often be very effective, especially if the information can be passed around quickly to other commanders who can use it with their own troops. The on-the-spot creation of new insights on how to deal with novel challenges and the rapid movement of information is what contributes to the ever-more important adaptability and flexibility of a modern Army. It can also inform and affect the overall strategy that relies on continuous intelligence from the ground.

Over the years, Nate and Tony had many front-porch conversations and shared a wide array of ideas with each other that they would apply to their own commands. Without their personal relationship, they never would have been able to cross-fertilize their leadership practice in a timely or efficient enough manner to be useful to each other. Under the Army's hierarchical knowledge management system, the best ideas the two men shared on their porches would have taken months, if not years, to get approved and disseminated. First, they would have been passed vertically up the chain of command to be reviewed by senior officers and identified as effective. Then the ideas would have to be validated by the organization's "owner" of functional knowledge and

packaged in a way that would ultimately not include rich context, reducing the idea to a set of principles. Then—maybe—they would be finally distributed back out to the field.

Furthermore, for one of Nate's and Tony's ideas to be passed on to future generations of company commanders, it would require structured communication with the Army headquarters staff responsible for capturing and categorizing the organization's codified knowledge. The new idea would then have to be validated as one of the Army's "best practices," in its "doctrine." Once vetted, validated, and approved, the idea might be stored in the Army's Center for Lessons Learned repository. If it were an extremely good and broadly applicable idea, it might be written about in a field manual and embedded in the institution's training curriculum. The entire process might easily take eighteen to twenty-four months from idea inception to incorporation in a field manual or training syllabus.

An example of the time lag is what occurred in Somalia in the years between 1992 and 1994. After the Army's initial experiences with peace enforcement operations there, it took about eighteen months to publish the white paper written on these types of operations. By then, however, several follow-on unit rotations had already been completed, none of which had had access to valuable lessons learned. It simply took too long to harness the experiences and collective know-how of the initial units who served in the country and make their insights accessible for those who prepared for the same experience set.

### Creating a Virtual Front Porch

Nate and Tony recognized the critical importance of timely management of relevant knowledge, not only in terms of its impact on their own performance, but also as a contribution to the overall strategic and operational effectiveness of the Army. Their front-porch experiences had taught them that informally sharing their insights and professional issues without relying on the formal flow of communication was personally gratifying, and it helped them to be better company commanders. Wouldn't it be great if they could move their private front-porch conversations to a *virtual front porch* that would enable their peers across the

world to engage in a similar experience? Together with some of their friends, Nate and Tony came up with the vision of a Web-based resource that would provide lateral connections and real-time learning and collaboration opportunities, an online space in which seasoned and current company commanders could share experiences, lessons learned, management systems, and helpful planning aids with current and future commanders.

With entrepreneurial spirit, and without formal approval from their superiors, the founding team began working out the details of their idea. They teamed up with others to create an "e-zine" on the Internet, which they called "CompanyCommand." They solicited ideas, stories, and helpful tools from other commanders and would post these once a month for others to read and access. They also featured themed first-person articles, monthly profiles of commanders, ongoing message threads, and specialty subgroups devoted to exploring specific topics of value to segments of their audience. And, they facilitated an online discussion forum in which members could post questions and provide feedback. The site's original design was modeled on an outdoorsman Web "forum" that allowed hunters and fishermen to ask questions and get immediate answers from others.

Everything in the online space was targeted toward the effective practice of company command and organized around its main functions, such as leadership, combat, training, fitness, marksmanship, and more. If commanders did these well, they would be effective. To populate the new forum, they recruited a team of volunteers who acted as "topic leads" for the different content sections of the community space. The volunteers were selected for their passion and experience in the topic area they were responsible for. For example, the *marksmanship training* section of the community was facilitated by an experienced commander who had deep expertise in and a passion for this aspect of training.

In the first month, the site had 400 hits (the founding team and all of their friends), but word of mouth spread quickly, and readership began to take off. To further expand the number of engaged community members, Nate, Tony, and their team worked on creating a social architecture that would foster a bigger grassroots movement. They recruited "point men" from

across the ranks of company commanders through their personal network of relationships. The point men, located at Army posts around the world, spread the word and generated participation at the local level. The founding team reasoned that if they could create a network that added value to each member's work, other company commanders would be attracted to the forum, without having their involvement mandated by the Army. Their logic proved to be true.

### Becoming a Community of Practice

Etienne Wenger is credited with coining the term *community of practice*. He defined the term to mean "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."<sup>1</sup> By definition, communities of practice engage practitioners in meaningful conversation, which could involve connecting either in face-to-face and/or virtual dialogue.

As CompanyCommand expanded its membership among U.S. Army commanders, it became a widely used informal community of practice. During its first two years, the site still remained largely under the radar as an unsanctioned Army resource, although the founding team's superiors were aware of its existence and tacitly allowed it to operate. As the popularity and usage of the platform grew, the initiative's value became more and more evident. The online space was succeeding at connecting disparate leaders in synchronous and asynchronous discussions, suspending many of the knowledge-sharing limitations associated with the usual Army protocols, as well as time and geolocation. The forum enabled its participants to create new knowledge for novel challenges as they arose unexpectedly in the Army's environment over time.

Two examples illustrate the effectiveness of the CompanyCommand online forum in fulfilling these needs:

1. Greg, a commander in Germany, wrote to the forum with a question about how to best support his team logistically in combat. A Gulf War I company commander, Hal, responded

to him with his firsthand advice, as did Patrick, who had recently commanded a company. Other forum members soon added more sharing from their experience, all providing Greg with extensive high-value content as he prepared his team for Iraq. Without CompanyCommand, Greg would have spent hours researching through the Army's doctrine, and he would have never found the amount of timely, contextually relevant, and down-to-earth practical wisdom of experience he received from Hal, Patrick, and others who as fellow professionals responded to his question from their own experience.

2. Stan went to Iraq intending to be a staff officer throughout his deployment—and not expecting to command a company. However, when a company commander in his unit was killed in action, he was told to prepare to take command immediately. He checked in with the CompanyCommand team and was able to connect with three seasoned commanders who had had the exact same experience of needing to quickly take command in Iraq following a previous commander's death. As can be imagined, this unique circumstance is filled with complexities that a traditional approach to taking charge isn't equipped for. The challenge of helping a unit grieve its past commander while at the same time getting back on its feet to accomplish its missions is overwhelming. Stan was able to get advice, support, and encouragement from many experienced leaders in a way that he could have never found by any other means or timing.

### Gaining Formal Acceptance

After two years of operation, and sporting several thousand members, the senior ranks of the Army took serious note of CompanyCommand. The success stories from the field, the excitement of company commanders who used the platform, and a growing insight into the necessity of increased organizational adaptability and responsiveness convinced them that the forum represented a unique and indispensable value. They approved a plan to formally adopt, resource, and host the CompanyCommand platform behind the Army's firewall.

The founders formally transferred all rights to the Army, even though to them, as fellow members of the community, the initiative had always been from the outset owned by and for the profession.

Today, CompanyCommand is fully resourced by the Army and is used extensively throughout the organization, not only among junior officers in the field but also by Army training facilities tasked with developing junior officers. The Army lets CompanyCommand remain an “informal” community of practice. It trusts the self-organizing dynamic of the platform and does not mandate its usage. Members can determine on their own the content of the site, how it is used relative to the formal trainings received, and what value the information provides to them in their professional leadership development.

The founding team now plays both an operational and an enabling role. Similar to the philosophy of the Red Cross, the full-time team members view themselves in service to the true heroes of the organization—the members and volunteers who drive different elements of the community of practice. The Army supplements their work with a full-time service staff that includes an operating officer who focuses on the day-to-day operations of the forum, and a chief technology officer who focuses on continuous development of the online forum experience using emergent technology, such as the capability to tag content and upload video entries. The team also has a full-time facilitator who seeks to recruit and train volunteer topic leaders for subgroups and topics within the forum.

Army leaders continue to be committed to the essence of the founding team’s idea—creating countless real-time virtual front-porch conversations that increase the effectiveness of individual company commanders and improve the overall corporate practice of company command across the organization. The forum remains dedicated to connecting past, present, and future company commanders in an ongoing and vibrant conversation on how they can enact their responsibilities to lead and build combat-ready teams and how to deal with challenging and ambiguous leadership situations. And, the platform still operates in a way that allows its members to own and drive the community’s direction and learning agenda. With ongoing U.S. Army deployments

to the Middle East, participation has continued to escalate. Not surprisingly, the most popular content areas today are those that deal with unit deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

### **Blending the Virtual Platform with Face-to-Face Activities**

After it had caught on virtually, CompanyCommand expanded into sponsoring face-to-face meetings to connect leaders on a local basis where they could discuss issues relevant to their practice of command. One of the key initiatives the team created is called “Leader to Leader” (L2L), in which the CompanyCommand team conducts in-person meetings with commanders located in a specific distant location.

The face-to-face sessions serve a dual function. On one hand, they actively reach out to local company commanders and inform them about ideas being discovered and lessons learned by their peers across the organization via the online platform. At the same time, they are designed to build trust and informally connect the otherwise isolated learnings of those disparate leaders back into the greater community. The knowledge flows two ways, as the forum learns from leaders located at the edges of the organization, and these leaders gain familiarity with the rich opportunities the platform provides. This blending of localized face-to-face gatherings with online community content has proven to be a powerful and effective approach for fostering learning and knowledge sharing in the context of a large borderless community of practice with members who are scattered throughout the globe.

An example of the effectiveness of the blended approach was an L2L meeting conducted in Iraq with a group of new company commanders. The facilitator of the session began by introducing carefully selected content from the community online space that was highly relevant to the Iraq context; he actively shared it with the commanders to stimulate dialogue. To complement the virtual platform “knowledge” with real peer-to-peer encounters, the CompanyCommand team invited several company commanders who had spent time in Iraq to attend the meeting. Combining platform content with the rich background of the experienced

fellow commanders, they engaged in small-group discussions around a variety of topics that were relevant for new commanders, like how to build strong relationships with their first sergeants and how to develop a ninety-day on-boarding plan.

The sessions were successful in providing critical knowledge and useful tools to the newly minted company commanders who were about to begin their command responsibilities in Iraq. The model is highly effective, and the team has used this blended approach for many other L2L meetings.

### Turning the Social Infrastructure of Learning Upside Down

Overall, the CompanyCommand initiative has not only revolutionized an important element of leadership learning in the Army, it is also changing established routines of organizational communication. Emphasizing self-organized, just-in-time horizontal discourse about the essence of the profession, it has created an entirely new perspective for how military training and battle preparation can be accomplished effectively. This perspective is very different from the conventional approach to learning and knowledge management. It differs particularly in three important aspects that constitute much of the social and organizational texture of learning in complex organizations, namely:

1. Who decides what is relevant?
2. Who controls access to information?
3. Where is relevant knowledge located?

The answers to these questions determine not only the organizational culture of transmitting and sharing knowledge; as this case clearly demonstrates, they also determine the degree of agility, flexibility, and responsiveness of large-scale systems. The traditional approach to learning is a mirror of the mechanistic and hierarchical approach to organization and communication: knowledge resides in the expert (or teacher, superior, and so on), who decides what knowledge is relevant and who controls access to the relevant information. The CompanyCommand approach

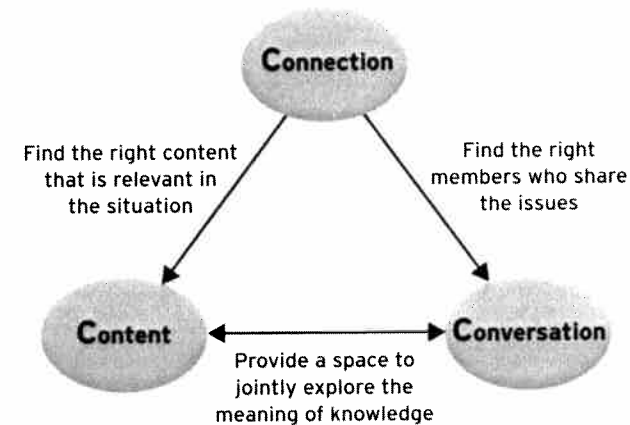
turned this logic upside down. Let's have a closer look on how the project dealt with the three questions.

### People Decide for Themselves What Is Relevant

The first principle the CompanyCommand team learned about building a successful community of practice stems from a deep conviction that people learn best when they can decide for themselves what information is relevant to them. This principle revolves around "three Cs"—content, connection, and conversation.<sup>2</sup> The platform must be designed so that every member of the community can easily find quality content relevant to their particular need, interest, or challenge; connect with other members of the community who might be relevant to them; and develop meaningful conversations with those who have relevant experiences to offer (Exhibit 6.1). At any time, it is up to each member to determine what information is most useful to them within their specific context, and it is up to them what they will learn.

For example, if a member comes into the community space looking for advice on how to conduct a memorial service for a

**Exhibit 6.1. The 3 Cs: Empowering People to Decide the Relevance of Information**





lost soldier, he can find related content on the community's online space, which could be a story, a model service program, a video interview, or another relevant knowledge object. He can connect in meaningful conversation with other members who have either lost a soldier and experienced grieving or planned a service memorializing a soldier.

A good example of the power of the 3C model is a special initiative the CompanyCommand team accomplished to support some new commanders and their troops who were preparing to deploy to Afghanistan. To bolster the commanders' knowledge and confidence, the team created a Web-based survey and sent it out to every officer in the Army who had commanded a company in Afghanistan. The survey asked questions like:

- If a company commander could read only one book on Afghanistan before deploying, what book should it be, and why?
- What is one thing that surprised you when you got to Afghanistan? Explain.
- Describe one or two innovations you implemented and how they made a difference.

They collated the survey answers and organized them according to the questions and the respondent's rotation date in Afghanistan. They then published a hard-copy book containing the responses so that the commanders preparing to deploy to Afghanistan could easily carry the content with them and access it whenever they wanted. The content of the book was also made available on the online space. In addition, the CompanyCommand team also purchased the commercial book that was rated as the most highly recommended in the survey and provided a copy to each leader preparing to deploy.

To make the learning intervention a truly blended approach, the CompanyCommand team then organized an L2L session in which they invited six leaders who had commanded companies on the ground in Afghanistan to spend three days in face-to-face small-group discussions with the commanders who were about to deploy, a sort of front-porch meeting of the

minds. The experienced leaders shared their combat stories and passed on their hard-earned knowledge to those about to depart on the mission. The relevant, down-to-earth know-how exchanged in the face-to-face sessions could not have been as powerfully experienced in any other format. The team found that the in-person sessions contributed to forming deeply trusting relationships among the participants, which translated into ongoing connections between many of the participants on the online forum. At that time, the meetings also inspired a new subcommunity on the CompanyCommand online space, the "virtual front porch," created solely for the company commanders in Afghanistan.

The sum total of information and opportunities to learn generated by this initiative is extensive. CompanyCommand provided the content, the connections, and the conversation, but at all times the commanders made their own choices on the relevancy of the information to their own experience—an approach diametrically opposed, but complementary, to the traditional Army training deploying commanders receive.

### People Control the Access to Knowledge

The second principle that determines the dynamics of a learning solution relates to the control of knowledge. The team discovered that people have more willingness to be engaged in learning when it is created following the rule, "If *they* build it, *they* will come," than the opposite, "If *we* build it, *they* will come." Applying this principle is revolutionary compared to the Army's traditional knowledge management paradigm, in which the institution creates the knowledge necessary for deployment and determines when and how it is distributed to commanders.

How access to information and knowledge is designed is a major enabler—or disabler—of any community of practice. Some organizations realize the power of peer-to-peer exchange and create an online platform thinking they can foster a community of practice. Then they send out a memo essentially commanding people to use it—only to become disappointed by the lack of response. In not recognizing the principle of self-organization,

these organizations destroy the inherent opportunity of the system by applying a traditional top-down management approach. Contributing to the platform becomes a duty and part of the job description, and access and usage become regulated according to the logic of hierarchical control.

As CompanyCommand demonstrates, it's the opposite approach that yields engagement. Communities need to grow organically, and they can only do so when organizations limit themselves to being facilitators and enablers of the process, allowing the practitioners themselves to invent and create their own community space, the content, and the suite of resources most relevant to their needs. Ownership creates commitment, and communities thrive best when the essential democratic mantra is applied—a community *by* and *for* the people.

### Knowledge Resides in Both the Organization and the People

This third principle addresses one of the deepest issues of any organizational learning initiative: where the knowledge resides. Like most organizations, the Army traditionally has taken a strictly hierarchical approach to knowledge management. They often assume that the institution's knowledge systems, subject matter experts, and appointed senior leaders are the ones who possess the expertise of sufficient value and accuracy needed for effective practice. They distill best practices from those sources and transform that knowledge into policies and doctrines. They then train and direct field practitioners to teach and implement the work in those ways.

This model might be effective in a stable, reliable, incrementally changing environment in which linear processes can be codified and the future is predictable. During the comparatively stable environment of the Cold War, a top general in the Army could stand in the Fulda Gap in Germany and talk to a company commander on the ground about the way that he defended that same piece of terrain against a potential Russian attack twenty years ago. The combat model and the best practices for a commander at that time were codified and clear, and they could count that it would more or less stay this way.

But this static and top-down approach to knowledge is not in sync any more with today's dynamic and constantly changing military context, nor is it appropriate for most of today's business organizations. Change has become too fast and unpredictable, and traditional knowledge cannot keep up with the interdependencies under which we now operate. Also, taking into account the dynamic nature of the context, an organization's interventions change the conditions under which it acts, often in unpredictable ways. Like in a chess game, each move creates a new strategic situation, forcing the player to reevaluate the game and possibly come up with a new strategy.

Karl Weick calls the loss of stability today a *vu jade* experience—referring to the opposite of *déjà vu*. He uses the term to describe the sinking feeling one gets from the sense that “I’ve never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me.”<sup>3</sup> A perspective that relies only on previously codified and tested knowledge often leads exactly to this sense of *vu jade*, in which everything you’ve ever learned before seems useless.

Recognizing this problem, some organizations have turned to a more emergent approach to learning in which expertise and knowledge of best practices is seen as residing with the workers at the touchpoints or edges of the organization—the interface of the organization and the environment. In this perspective, senior leaders can see themselves more as *chief learners* than as *chief experts* whose job is to act as facilitators of an ongoing organizational learning process. They provide support by connecting those leaders on the edges of the organization, enabling them to collaborate.

This approach, while fostering agility, has its own set of limitations. It runs the risk that learning veers off from the organization's interests or that decisions made will not be aligned with the organization's overarching strategic goals. Lessons learned can become so highly contextual that they cannot be generalized into relevant knowledge everyone can use. In the military, for example, a lesson learned on the ground in Kosovo may not be relevant in Iraq. Lessons can be so diverse that even something learned in an outlying region of Iraq may not be applicable in Baghdad.

Given the limitation of both the hierarchical and emergent approaches to organizational learning, the CompanyCommand



team sought to develop a model that blends the two approaches to where knowledge resides and draw from the best of both. This approach seeks to align or balance both the informal (emergent) and the formal (hierarchical) aspects of organizational knowledge, creating a healthy tension that keeps strategic learning at the top of everyone's mind. It is important to feel this tension; its absence is an indicator that something has gone too far in one direction. For example, if the learning becomes too hierarchical, it easily becomes the latest corporate bulletin and loses the immediacy and relevance that drives involvement of the community members. But if the learning becomes too emergent and localized, it won't connect with the broad array of leaders who also need to acquire the organizational resources.

The aligned approach has the potential to bring organizational leaders and field practitioners into the same conversation. Through this structured encounter between formal organization and informal networks, both worlds benefit. The field is seen to be immediate, trustworthy, and having a significant voice in the organization's learning agenda. The institution is viewed as in touch, adding value to the practitioners through its backbone of knowledge and resources.

For example, institutional training system leaders who are tasked with training the next generation of leaders have the potential to add a strategic perspective to conversations while drawing emergent lessons from the field and offering them to novice leaders. This dynamic increases the relevance of the standard training schoolhouses while providing the otherwise detached senior leaders a broad view of what is being learned and applied across the peripheries of organization, where change happens on a daily basis.

Aligning the formal and informal is how organizations become highly adaptive. Conducting continuous conversations around current practices enables new challenges to be unearthed and identified as they arise, heightening the organization's ability to sense and respond quickly. As leaders scan the trends and themes across the community space, they are better able to anticipate emergent opportunities, needs, and threats. They can then shape the future with these in mind (Exhibit 6.2).

## Exhibit 6.2. Aligning Formal and Informal Knowledge Domains

*The power to transform the organization happens  
when the formal and the informal are aligned*



Source: CompanyCommand Team.

## Further Enhancements

Today, the Army is working with the founders and current staff to further enhance the value of CompanyCommand for self-organized lateral learning. New features are continuously being added to provide an even richer experience and further strengthen the unique architecture of the learning space. For instance, users can not only tag content themselves by using a community developed taxonomy, which makes it easier for everybody to find content; in a new feature, members can also create their own "folksonomy" of personal tags, which builds up a new vocabulary that commanders can share and adds a new richness to the traditional tagging. This practice-based linguistic differentiation provides distinctions that might prove useful in the continued advancement of the corporate practice of command.

Another attractive feature is a dedicated online forum in which seasoned commanders present a real-life leadership dilemma they experienced, and members can "vote" on a multiple-choice form which solution they would have chosen. Next, the results of the votes are made available to the community, illustrating the distribution of voting along with information about how the seasoned commander had handled it. Members can then join an online conversation with their peers about the pros and cons of the commander's solution versus the various

alternatives, thus improving their own decision-making skills and knowledge.

CompanyCommand has also implemented a social network-like feature, called iLink, which was developed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). When members log into the forum, they receive recommendations about new people to meet and new information to read, based on iLink's scanning their profiles and page views, then matching each user's interests to other people and pages. The forum is making every effort as well to innovate new technology as quickly as it comes out. They have explored, for example, technology that scans videos and interprets and translates speech to text so that videos could also be tagged and text searched.

To keep the platform alive in the minds of the company commanders, the team sends a monthly newsletter to all forum members. The newsletter features new content and is designed to attract them back online to the forum, thus strengthening the value of the network by increasing participation. Blending traditional media with the online platform, the team submits articles from members to a regularly printed Army magazine, thus "weaving" the forum into other Army communication efforts and encouraging those readers to come into the forum.

Inspired by the success of CompanyCommand, Army leaders have established another program that leverages the model as a key part of a new learning strategy. Called the "Battle Command Knowledge System," the program supports the development of networked communities of practice like CompanyCommand for key jobs at other hierarchical levels. Throughout a leader's professional career, he or she will be able to tap into a community of fellow practitioners, learning from peers in an ongoing and highly adaptive manner as he or she rotates through jobs.

### **Conclusion: Creating a Learning Architecture That Enables**

Communities of practice have been around for more than a decade, but few organizations have captured their strategic value as well as the founders of CompanyCommand and the U.S. Army. The evolution of CompanyCommand is a great example

of how to merge the informal and the formal, the emergent and the hierarchical, the adaptable and the controlled. The success of CompanyCommand in drawing members into the network, inspiring sharing across distance and function, and encouraging face-to-face meetings is impressive testimony to the value of innovative learning architectures.

But this case is also special for another reason: it takes place in the unique organizational structure and culture of the military. No other organization is built as much on discipline and a clear chain of command. For many, the Army is the very symbol of a hierarchical, authoritarian system. And justifiably so—there is little time for debate, pondering, and reluctance in the heat of combat.

So how could the CompanyCommand initiative—a "radically democratic" grassroots project—unfold so successfully in this context? After all, the logic of informal, self-organized, horizontal networks is arguably diametrically opposed to authoritarian control. Informal communities are voluntary, they are self-determined, they treat all members as equals, and they are about discourse and an interactive creation of meaning. But, ironically, it is exactly the military culture that may have been the most important factor in making the project so successful and sustainable that it has become a global benchmark.

Discipline and commitment to the profession—key values of the Army—played an important role in getting this venture off the ground. The founders and their team were highly dedicated to understanding the impact of their initiative and to continuously improving and fine-tuning the design of the learning universe they created. Speaking to members of the team, you can feel their passion and their very personal commitment to make the community work. They did it not because they were told so, or for an abstract cause of improving the practice of knowledge management and learning; they did it because they sincerely wanted to help their fellow commanders be better soldiers. This deep sense of community and belonging that characterizes members of the military goes hand in glove with the requirements of the social architecture of networks. Speaking with members of the CompanyCommand team, you can feel the deeply embedded service attitude that is typical of the Army

profession. This attitude made it natural for them to have a truly enabling (rather than controlling) mindset toward the project—one of the most important success criteria for informal network management. And finally, if there is any organization that requires teamwork, shared knowledge, and trust to survive and thrive, it is the military.

In other words—it is the very DNA of the Army that assures the robustness of the initiative. The tenets of the institution—discipline, service attitude, trust, a sense of community and belonging, and high standards of excellence—provide a powerful context for successfully anchoring an initiative based on emergence and self-determination.

The case illustrates with impressive clarity that informal networks that are based on voluntary participation and a free and self-determined flow of information thrive only if they are embedded in a solid organizational architecture—but it must be an architecture that is designed to enable, not to control. This requires a skillful management of the dialectic tension between the formal and the informal, something at which the CompanyCommand team excelled. After only a few years, the initiative has changed the culture of the Army, enhancing the organization's adaptability, flexibility, and responsiveness. It has become an important contribution for creating a "Learning Army," enabling it to better cope with the challenges of the twenty-first century.

### About the Principal of This Case

**Nate Allen** is an officer in the U.S. Army and is currently on faculty at the National Defense University. As representatives of the CompanyCommand and PlatoonLeader founding team, Nate and project cofounder Tony Burgess were recognized among *FastCompany* magazine's Top 50 Innovators in 2002. Nate's most recent paper, "Leader Development in Dynamic and Hazardous Environments: Company Commander Learning in Combat," received an American Educational Research Association's (AERA) Best Paper by a New Investigator Award in 2007. Nate Allen has a PhD in management and technology from George Washington University's business school. He also has an MA in industrial/organizational psychology and an MBA.

### Notes

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